

# Duck Regulations Move Toward Hunter's Choice

By Craig Bihrlé

North Dakota duck hunting regulations will look a bit different this year, following federal approval of a three-year trial called Hunter's Choice.

Basically, Hunter's Choice is designed to eliminate short seasons for species with low populations – primarily pintails and canvasbacks – so there isn't a closed season on those species while the regular duck season is still open. In a nationwide survey last year, about half the duck hunters preferred the Hunter's Choice concept over shortened or closed seasons, or other options for managing duck harvest.

All Central Flyway states are participating in the Hunter's Choice study. North Dakota and South Dakota are two of the five Central Flyway states that will not have any closed seasons. The other five Central Flyway states will have the same format as in previous years, when both the canvasback and pintail seasons were open only 39 days during a 74-day duck season.

Allowing a full season for canvasbacks and pintails, so hunters can "choose" to take one of these birds later in the season when in previous years hunting was closed, requires some new provisions that maintain protection for these species. The changes adopted for this season include:

- The duck daily bag limit is the same as the mallard limit, which is five per day and 10 in possession. For instance, if all you shoot is drake mallards, you can take five per day. If your first duck is a gadwall, only four drake mallards are allowed the rest of the day. For the last 10 years, North Dakota's duck limit was six daily and 12 in possession, which could include five mallards daily and 10 mallards in possession.

- The daily limit of five ducks can include only one hen mallard, *or* one pintail, *or* one canvasback. Previously, hunters could have two hen mallards per day, plus one canvasback plus one pintail when those seasons were open. This year, if you shoot a pintail as your first duck of the day, it would be illegal to shoot a hen mallard or a canvasback the rest of the day.

The hen mallard in this formula is what Mike Johnson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department migratory game bird management supervisor, terms a "buffer duck." Hen mallards are much more plentiful than pintails in North Dakota, and most hunters will likely forego a chance to take a pintail to keep open their options for bagging five mallards. If one of those mallards is a hen, it eliminates the option for taking a canvasback or pintail.

While hunters could take two hen mallards a day in the past, Johnson says the two-hen bag limit was likely to be eliminated anyway.

Previously, when canvasback and pintail seasons were closed while the regular duck season was open, hunters had the potential for taking an illegal duck on their first shot of the day.

Hunter's Choice, Johnson says, provides a certain comfort level, as the first duck taken during a hunt will be a legal bird. If the first duck is not one of the restricted species/sex, that same comfort level applies to the next duck. It's the "hunter's choice," Johnson added, to take one of the restricted birds, or hold off for other opportunities.

## Pintails and Canvasbacks

Duck harvest management is still an evolving science. Generally, waterfowl biologists have for decades reduced limits or closed seasons when duck numbers were on a downward slide, and increased limits when duck populations were peaking. The challenge, always, is to provide maximum opportunities for plentiful ducks like mallards, while at the same time protecting species whose populations are low, like pintails and canvasbacks, without creating regulations that are too complicated.

The continental pintail population has fallen dramatically over the past several decades, even during the last 10 years when most other duck species have flourished. The canvasback population has been relatively stable, Johnson noted, it's just that they've never been all that numerous.

To protect canvasbacks, waterfowl managers have periodically closed the season completely, kept the limit at one a day, and for the past several years, shortened the season.

Twenty years ago the pintail daily limit was three. It went to two, then one, followed by a shortened season put in place a few years ago.

Hunter's Choice is an effort to determine the effectiveness of more standardized regulations, rather than different regulations occurring every year. "I don't really regard this as a major change," Johnson said. "It's also an effort to find out what hunters think about these regulations. The three-year evaluation will tell us if it works for ducks, and if it works for hunters."

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